



The film *Fire In The Blood* focuses on the campaign for AIDS drugs in Africa.

## FILM

# Walking the edge at Sundance

Society and technology collide at this year's leading independent film festival, finds **Jascha Hoffman**.

Technology and imagination are cinema's warp and weft. So it is hardly surprising that the film industry has long been preoccupied with the leading edge of technological research — from *Metropolis* to *Transformers* — and with the ethical and social ambiguities that surround it. A range of movies tackle those grey areas at this year's Sundance Film Festival in Utah.

"We relate to the technology that we're offered," says John Nein, a senior film programmer at the festival. "We have to contend with the social and political forces around that technology."

The festival was founded in 1981 to help independent directors reach a wider audience. This year's science-and-technologizing offerings might convey less outright science than in years past, but they probe big issues — from the 'new' nuclear power

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to Google, WikiLeaks and the 1970s innovators who brought computers into our homes and our pockets.

A prominent pair

of feature films deal with rivalry and uncertainty at the dawn of the digital era. Joshua Stern's *JOBS*, a biopic of Apple founder Steve Jobs, stars Ashton Kutcher as the young titan designing software and devices that will usher in the age of personal computing. *Computer Chess*, a comedy-drama about programmers teaching computers to play chess in the 1980s, underlines the programmers' anxiety to prove that computers could hold their own against humans. That remains a live issue as we begin to carry on conversations with the computers in our phones and cars. "The big philosophical questions may seem charmingly nostalgic, but lord knows we haven't answered them yet," director Andrew Bujalski wrote when raising a modest budget for the film online.

Two documentaries tackle controversial efforts to spread information on the Internet — and the resulting backlash. Ben Lewis's *Google and the World Brain* charts the Internet giant's decade-long effort to scan the world's books into a giant digital archive, prompting legal action from authors and librarians. And from prolific documentary director Alex Gibney comes *We Steal Secrets*, which

traces the evolution of WikiLeaks from a site founded in Sweden in 2006 by Australian former hacker Julian Assange to an international movement that aims to make secrecy obsolete with actions such as the release of 250,000 US diplomatic cables in 2010 and 2011.

Medicine features heavily in another brace of documentaries, both of which show researchers and advocates racing against the clock to devise and disseminate cures. Sean and Andrea Fine's *Life According to Sam* traces the efforts of husband-and-wife US doctors Scott Berns and Leslie Gordon to understand the rare premature-ageing disease progeria, after their son was diagnosed at age two. Their work over the ensuing decade has led to gene discovery, preliminary drug trials and potential insights into the ageing process. Africa at the turn of the millennium is the focus of Dylan Gray's *Fire in the Blood*, which follows the public-health activists, including South African Zackie Achmat, who pushed governments and drug companies to make AIDS drugs available to Africans.

Even the films with an environmental theme have a technological edge. *Pandora's Promise*, directed by Robert Stone, is a documentary about environmentalists such as the British journalist Mark Lynas, who, after opposing nuclear power, now support the use of new technologies such as small modular nuclear reactors to reduce reliance on fossil fuels. The eco-thriller *The East*, directed by Zal Batmanglij and starring Brit Marling and Ellen Page, features an activist group that attacks corporations using their own products, such as harmful chemicals.

Some of the festival's more conceptual works use technology to encourage viewers to empathize with other creatures. *Coral: Rekindling Venus*, is a full-dome planetarium show by Australian artist Lynette Wallworth. Deep-sea photography and music by Antony Hegarty (of the New-York-based group Antony and the Johnsons) among others highlight the threats to coral reefs. The short film *Primate Cinema: Apes as Family*, by artist Rachel Mayeri, shows the reactions of real chimpanzees to a television programme acted by humans in chimp costumes, inviting us to ponder how our fellow primates see us.

A panel on science at the movies, organized by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation's Science and Film programme, promises a frank discussion of "the best and worst of cinema science" while honouring the "creative, imaginative, speculative and even adventurous" spirit of scientists and film-makers. Panelists, including director Darren Aronofsky and theoretical physicist Lisa Randall, will also select a winner for this year's Sloan Prize for films about technology and science. ■

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